The Difference Heaven Makes: Rehearing the Gospel as News

Christopher Morse. London & New York: T&T Clark, 2010. 141 pages.

These days, anyone speaking of "heaven" in theologically serious tones has some explaining to do. That person faces what Christopher Morse might call an "accountability" requirement. Morse has invested an entire career in working out what this means,[1] and his new book, in addition to its other benefits, provides a window onto how this procedure -- which so many students have heard so much about -- actually works. As with scripture itself, however, its best secrets are not revealed by a casual reading.

The Difference Heaven Makes begins by pointing out that talking about heaven is not easy for many of us. Or shouldn't be. Easy talk about "heavenly" matters easily drifts either into complacent sentimentality or anxious superstition, and so we had better listen carefully before just looking "Lo, here" and "lo, there." Morse recommends giving what is said about heaven a "hearing," in both senses of that word -- careful listening to the "soundings" of its language (8), and careful scrutiny of the presentation of its testimony (4). We need to determine, first, what is being said (which is not obvious from the mere letter of scripture); and, secondly, whether that speaking should be trusted (which is not at all obvious from the state of things we see around us). Within these related aims, Morse's interpretive method takes shape.

Morse's intention is not to pick fights with other theologians. His characteristically irenic approach is always to remain open to diverse possibilities of interpretation, which too fixed an explicit theological agenda on his own part would nullify in advance. This alone might classify him as a religious "liberal" – though only with significant qualifications (46) since Morse's project looks beyond (without ignoring) the narrower concerns of historical-critical scholarship, and looks beyond (without ignoring) the political utility of selective interpretive reconstructions. In a sense, he even looks beyond Christianity itself, as he approvingly cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer, for whom Jesus is not the inventor of the Christian religion, but is "God's life socially embodied and formative communally in what is now taking place." God's embodied life "spans all creation and is not confined religiously simply to those who may say, 'Lord, Lord'" (91).

To where exactly then does he look? Morse's own position is clear and firm on several points.

First, "heaven" is the language of good *news* and not simply an antiquated linguistic form. This makes Morse a kind of evangelical, unsatisfied with treating such topics (as many past liberal scholars have) purely as a matter for historical-critical research. In this regard, Christians in our own modern and postmodern era have an even heavier burden of accountability than in earlier times, since speak-

1 Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit : A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief*, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2009).

ing about heaven no longer captures the interest of the normal science of our own day and strikes many of us less as urgent news than as curious relic. Certainly the ancient world knew nothing of the demythologizing project of liberal scholarship, but whatever we think of some of its findings, that exegetical effort raises pressing questions that demand our attention. Though Bultmann's own research undertook far too narrow a task,[2] we must still distinguish between the kergymatic kernel and the cultural husk of the Gospel message (3). The obvious problem then is to formulate that distinction on terms that do not presume our own agenda-driven attempts to conceptually control the good news itself – something that the Bultmann school arguably failed to do.

And this is Morse's second point -- that heaven's nature and its arrival are not under our control in any way. Heaven's coming is not in our hands -- or, to put in a phrase Morse favors, heaven is not "in hand." Heaven is "the course of God's forthcoming" (10); it is not merely an emblem of our own altered state of consciousness nor is it the hard-won result of our own spiritual practices. Talk about God is not to be reduced to being merely a symbol for our own subjectivity. Morse takes seriously a theology of transcendence, in other words, and here he cites Louis J. Martyn: the coming of heaven is "a liberating invasion of the cosmos that cannot be tracked prior to its coming" (75). Likewise, Morse resists the domestication of "heaven" by those liberals who would reduce the message of Jesus to the wisdom of a sage – either a Kant or a Crossan.[3] Though he certainly had wise things to say, Jesus was an apocalypticist, and his wisdom was spoken in parabolic terms which, though familiar to his listener, were used to signify what was momentously unfamiliar (55). Once again, today's more conservative evangelicals might find their hearts strangely warming to this aspect of Morse's liberal project.

Thirdly, however, heaven's announcement is "less about" an eternal hereafter (a place we go toward) than it is about a "timely taking-place" which is, even now, coming toward us -- so that heaven, or the *basileia tou theou*, is already "at hand" (21). This is at odds with popular culture, where mention of "the heavens" or "heaven" still directs our gaze, either physically or metaphysically, toward what is said to lie either in outer space or in the hereafter; and, in either case, we would be looking beyond where we physically are now. Morse denies that this is what the testimony of scripture -- or rather, what "most of the references" in it -- suggest (4). Morse points to the fact that heaven shares an essential feature of earth itself: both are creations of God. God's forthcoming (from "heaven") takes its course within and not apart from the created order, and thus within "a current state of affairs and arguably a scenario of life in the real world" (17). This may be the point where many conservative evangelical readers (who typically are deeply invested in this notion of heaven as, literally, a real location of reward or judgment) might begin feeling uneasy.

Fourthly, Morse's reading of the text depicts heaven as a community of saints, a cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. This may at first sound archaic to some of us,

2 Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Keryma and myth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 1-44.

3 At least in Crossan's *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 53. For his more recent views, see *First Light: Jesus and the Kingdom* (http://www.livingthequestions.com/xcart/home.php?cat=410)

but that depends upon how one listens. Ever rhetorically cautious, Morse suggests that scripture here "may" be making a metaphorical point directed once again at "a scenario of life in the real world." Pauline texts certainly appear to portray believers as already guaranteed citizenship[4] in heaven, here and now, and the two-fold consequence of this involves one's rights and one's responsibilities. "The hearer's right to exist on earth, the legitimacy of their being who they are and where they are as God's creation upon the earth," (18) derives not from earthly authority but from God, who shows "no partiality."[5] Heaven's coming, in other words, is a liberation. And the citizenry of believers should live their lives[6] "in a manner worthy of [this] good news."[7]

So that's the story of Heaven in a nutshell. It's a dramatically minimalist story. It does not require the eschatological details many have traditionally supposed: but neither does it leave us with only a reader's responsive imagination. "Heaven" is both incommensurable with any of the logical concepts we can explicate, and irreducible to any of the vague imaginings we can invent. Scriptural talk of heaven is a startling and scarcely comprehensible announcement that requires scrupulous listening -- one that employs both our critical and our imaginative faculties in order to make sense of an apparently implausible claim: namely, that something of incomparable moment is happening to us (even now), whose origin lies in a power (*virtus*) outside our control and whose consequence is to transform us from creatures of impoverished self-reliance to beings with a glorified future.

And this leads to the final point. How should *we* be, in the face of this in-breaking news event? What kind of lived life would be "worthy of [this] good news"? Once again, Morse distinguishes himself from easy answers on both ends of the theological spectrum, though he spends more time distancing himself from the views he is probably closest to. In this regard, Morse is an unabashed apocalypticist.

Many liberals since Kant have been deaf to the soundings of the apocalyptic, perhaps because they have not entirely emerged from the shadow of fundamentalism themselves. For them, as for Bonhoeffer's un-reformed Protestants (88), the world is what it is to our enlightened commonsense, so the work to be done is for us to hammer out a sliver of space for Christian fellowship. Johannes Weiss at least recognized that this was not the original sounding of scripture: as Morse recounts (82-86), Weiss rejected the historical authenticity of the Kantian secularization of the gospel, but not its appeal to us moderns -- precisely because the modernist Weiss could see no way that "the form of the world" could really be passing away. One major feature of the modernist project has been to capture a univocally significant rendering of reality, and Weiss and his strand of late-Kantian Christians could not conceive of apocalyptic language as meaningful except in the most cosmically, historically, and physically literal way. So for modernist Christians, there seemed no choice but to reject apocalypticism, and to work instead at becoming moral and building what could only with great interpretive generosity be christened "the Kingdom of God."

But modernist listening is deaf to the scriptural message since its entire frame of reference is the world of "enlightened" commonsense. What is coming to apoca-

4 *Politeuma*, also translated as "commonwealth" (Phil. 3:20).

5 Eph. 6:9.

6 *Politeueshthe.*

7 Phil. 1:27.

lyptic fulfillment cannot be measured by the form of the world as we presently envisage it (49), for *that* is just what is passing away. Morse gently insists that we need to relieve ourselves of fundamentalism -- which he tellingly describes not in terms of "literalism" (which can simply mean careful attention to the letter of text), but in terms of univocity of meaning (34). The images that encode the message do not mean one and only one thing, now and evermore.

Images of cosmic cataclysm were what we might call an "empirical" category for first-century Christians: they expected to see this soon happening before their very eyes, just as various literary images described it. Must they be that for us? And if not, does that mean that the message is no longer apocalyptic? Morse would answer "no" to both these questions. The text is meant to enliven us "here and now" -- not "once and for all" (Bonhoeffer). The text must be adapted to the times, and since the way humans understand anything evolves with the cultural setting, so must our interpretation of the images drawn from the text.

Once we see this, we need to be prepared to "read" the world around us through more than just everyday commonsense. Commonsense and empirical science give *form* to our understanding (where "form" is a category of cultural interpretation), and commonsense (along with science, to some extent) is captive to the tensions and torpors of the cultural moment. Faithful auditors of scripture do not mistake this worldly wisdom for the wisdom of the text, and doing so was arguably the deepest confusion of nineteenth-century liberal scholarship. Accordingly, faithful listening to scripture is prepared to be *informed*, in more than just the ordinary sense of that term. This is what the hearing of the Word means: being transformed by becoming in-formed -- formed within, by the inbreaking of the spiritual reality conveyed in the text. This is "the form of Jesus Christ," which "moulds our form in its own likeness" (Bonhoeffer), and thereby gives us the eyes to see and the ears to hear a reality that is now at hand, though not "in hand."

Moreover, Morse says, we need to be "on hand" to respond to what we then discern. What our facing reality calls *for,* the reality facing us calls *forth* (94). And this is perhaps the most telling departure from the more prominent forms of Christian liberalism. Our most faithful responses may not be called forth by moral maxims dispensed by earnest preachers, for that only urges us on to greater efforts of will. Rather, scripture calls us to a discerning interpretation (*dokimazein*), which Morse unpacks as both "envisagement" and "engagement" (79). Once informed, we envisage the reality before us just as clearly as we see the changing of the weather (Luke 12:54-56). Once informed, "with knowledge and full insight" (Phil 1:9-10) we then can determine what we should be engaged in doing, ever mindful that the coming of the kingdom is the doing "on earth as it is in heaven," and that the word from heaven to its earthly citizenry is good news to the poor and liberation for the oppressed (Luke 4: 18-19).

At the same time, however, there is a perplexity that underlies this entire discussion, one that has to do with the hermeneutical process of coming to embrace this story in the first place. Morse is tracing a very fine line in this book, and he knows it. He presents a rich and provocative gospel story, and finds "most" of the references in scripture calling in the direction he outlines (4), but (he readily admits) this is not the

only story one could tell. "Without claiming more of the subject than knowing how the Gospel testimonies sound, certain implications...may [sic] draw our attention" (15). Or, again, they may not. Others hear a different hermeneutical call in the very same passages. Donald G. Bloesch, one of the foremost conservative theologians within the very liberal United Church of Christ, hears the scripture quite differently -- as referencing heaven and hell as "time-space dimensions beyond our space and time."[8] So too, Roman Catholic theologian John Thiel envisages a thickly scripted picture of a postmortem heavenly life, in which the earthly dead retain personal identities that continue to be shaped by moral and spiritual development in the hereafter (104-5), making Christianity perhaps surprisingly similar to Asian accounts of reincarnation. The soundings they compile are quite different from those in *The Difference Heaven Makes.*

This is not a challenge that Morse addresses in any detailed way in this volume. However it runs beneath the surface at every turn. Though he insists that the content of heaven's forthcoming is not reducible to human psychology, "soundings" register in and to individual subjects. Differences in the way passages "sound" are subjective differences, and so at this point one naturally wonders if here we haven't slipped off that precariously fine line that Morse traces -- between the metaphysically robust foundational framework that conservatives typically require, and the more sociable and personalized lyrical intuitions that the spiritualized postmodern folk seem stuck with. Obviously one can't just trust every spiritual claim that comes our way, and so (one might ask) why trust the soundings that Morse hears? For that matter, why even trust our own listenings?

Fortunately, this volume does not appear out of a vacuum. For anyone perplexed by this next layer of questioning, Christopher Morse has already provided us with a lengthy treatment of just these matters,[9] and anyone with the ears to hear will find there a welcome resource for pursuing these matters.

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8 Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology: Life, Ministry & Hope*, vol. 2 (Peabody Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001), 212.

9 Morse, *Not Every Spirit : A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief.*